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Subtraction and refraction: self and process in the work of Martin Smith

In one of his early self-portraits (*The Sculptor*, 1845) the French Romantic realist Gustave Courbet depicts himself in the guise of a medieval mason, reclining by a stream in rocky woodland alone and apparently exhausted. With his eyes turned skyward he seems to radiate an almost beatific fatigue. In his hands he holds a chisel and mallet and beside him we can see the work in progress – a woman's head resting on an amphora carved directly into the face of the rock on which he sits. This self-portrait eloquently summarises the Romantic fascination with sculpture and nature that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century[i]. With his capacity to shape directly the physical matter of the world, the sculptor represented a fantasy of absolute artistic control. As Courbet's tools demonstrate, this authority was epitomised by the drama of chipping laboriously at the hardest of natural materials. Stone carving was a literal reshaping of the world via an irrevocable subtraction. It represented a solid and definitive gesture that stood in stark contrast to both the supple flexibility of paint and the dynamic social and economic shifts that were occurring across the European continent at that time.

But if Courbet's painting is firstly a manifesto declaring masculine 'mastery', it is one pregnant with Romantic melancholy. To Courbet the painter, the straightforward permanence of the stone sculptor's trade represented a paradise lost: the medieval mason was the epitome of honest masculinity unavailable to the gentrified modern European artist. Courbet's painting presents us with a view of modern masculinity in which the fundamental language is one of heroic loss. In it, the straightforward relations between man and labour attributed to the medieval world have been forever lost to the modern male subject. This conception of a 'subtractive' masculinity has proven surprisingly enduring. From the monumental hollow forms of Henry Moore to the 'back to nature' mantra of the contemporary men's movement, modern male subjectivity remains circumscribed by Romantic language that centralises and aggrandises loss.

The relationship between male subjectivity and loss is central to the work of Martin Smith, but it is one in which the masculine tropes exemplified by Courbet's masonic alter ego - mastery, isolation and loss - are continuously interrupted. Smith has been exploring these ideas through his photography for a number of years, but it is in his

series *In response to being someone else*, where this enquiry finds its most focussed expression. As the title suggests, Smith is exclusively concerned with an 'othered' subjectivity: the otherness of ourselves to ourselves across time. These are natural questions for an obsessive photographer and archivist such as Smith to explore. In his work, Smith ranges back and forth across his entire oeuvre, drawing images from a library of photographs that dates back to his teenage years. Inasmuch as these photographs are historical documents, Smith's work automatically engages notions of history and nostalgia. But Smith's subject matter does not revolve around indentifiable events and overt autobiographical content. Instead he selects banal, seemingly anonymous spaces; places that harbour personal associations but are otherwise unremarkable: depopulated cityscapes, anonymous laneways and dreary urban spaces. These are images of ambiguous spaces, familiarly generic visions of the peripheries of the modern city. In different ways, each of these images suggests growth and movement: a mass of weed-infested foliage, an apartment stairway, a seaside boulevard or a playground of desiccated play equipment. The result is an impression of frozen crescendo. These are spaces in which dramatic significance never culminates. This perpetual deferral of resolution (like Smith's own endlessly recycled archive) combined with the muted or washed out tonal palette, equates to an impression of melancholia: a perpetual state of unspecified mourning[ii].

For Smith, this melancholia is a content that is intrinsic to the photographic medium. Just as Courbet's self-portrait uses the honesty of sculpture as a device for representing the deception of paint, so Smith's melancholic subjects exemplify the 'grief' that underpins the photograph as a medium. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes famously explored the uncanny effect photography has by making absence present: it shows us here and now, what once was elsewhere. According to Barthes' formulation the photograph is an intrinsically melancholic medium – destined to always mourn its lost subject. For Smith, this 'native' content establishes a procedural framework for his photography in which loss forms both the subject and the object. Smith's work is intrinsically melancholic; it is product of a selfhood gained via a study of its own lost retinal encounters. The camera, as a documentary medium, provides the illusion of an authenticity, the photograph behaving as a surrogate retina that preserves the fleeting details of vision that the real retina passes onto the brain and forgets almost immediately. In looking at Smith's work, our eyes perform the

same act of looking as we join the artist in seeing himself through time. This distribution of self as a dynamic process, rather than a fixed point of view, is the challenge that Smith's work poses to the notion of the isolated self-mastery of conventional masculinity. Smith shares with us his own lack of fixity by repeatedly revealing his own efforts of recovery and remembrance. The 'subtractive' aspect of the photographic process that Barthes identified here gives rise to a *re*fractive effect – our view *of* Smith's work becomes a view *through* his work, and thus a view through Smith as a subject.

This refractive quality is further activated by the dramatic intervention that Smith performs upon the photograph itself. In a parallel to Courbet's heroic excavation of stone, Smith delicately carves texts into his photographs, disrupting the transparency of the photograph by drawing attention to its materiality. Smith frequently exhibits the cut outs with the photographs themselves – often allowing them to drift freely within the enclosed space of the picture frame. The implied absence that emanates through the photographs themselves is interrupted by a literal one: the holes left by the carved letters. On the one hand, this is a radical disruption to the image and a reflection of the dramatic way in which memory can be indelibly 'written' upon a site. But more than this, the holes produced in the image allow us to see through the image – a literal manifestation of the refractive effect of the camera lens. Just as light passed through a lens to produce the photograph, light now passes through the image itself. If the camera serves to reinforce the logic of Cartesian thought in which all phenomena arranges itself around a focal subject, Smith's punctured photographs allude to the complex interactions of spatiality and subjectivity that are always operating within the photograph.

The exploration of subjectivity is also central to the texts the artist works with. In his inscriptions Smith presents narratives that efface the heroism of the male subject. His tightly crafted tales reveal moments of awkwardness and paint a portrait of a subject not entirely 'in sync' with his surroundings as he navigates the complexities of social relations: social *faux pas*, backyard mishaps, romantic fumblings and altercations with roommates. These tales document moments of ambiguity but they are themselves ambiguous in refusing to perform any clear didactic function. Instead they resemble the kinds of stories exchanged between friends – the micro narratives through which

we provide a progressive portrait to our loved ones. Like his photographs, Smith's tales offers a glimpse of a subject in time. He does not provide the viewer with a seamless vision of the maker, but rather a serial encounter with subjectivity in motion.

Along with his diaristic texts, Martin also incorporates song lyrics. At first glance, these appear to mirror the adolescence of his diary entries, evoking a pre-internet teen world in which knowing song lyrics carried with it significant social advantage. As Smith's lyrics provoke us to recall, the faithful recording of song lyrics was not simply a gratuitous social exercise – the song lyric also consecrated the feelings of alienation and frustration that tend to accompany adolescence. Song lyrics provide us with slogans with which to apprehend and represent that isolation. (Recall the energy and time that was expended selecting the appropriate lyric with which to adorn the front of the school diary as a teenager.) But, like his stories, Smith's lyrics are in fact drawn from a spectrum of sources that move beyond the average teenage musical lexicon: Nick Cave and AC/DC are quoted, but so is Hank Williams. Smith's sources all tend to be lyricists who address notions of estrangement and isolation in various ways. While these could merely function as a gratuitous theatrical device, Smith carefully chooses the lyrics he uses according to their use of natural imagery. Like the romanticised wilderness of Courbet's painting, natural phenomena in these songs are used as a metaphor for male subjectivity: isolation (Williams), impotence (Cave) and fury (AC/DC). In each of these lyrics, whether camp or sincere, the forms of nature become manifestations of masculine affect. Just as Smith's photographs represent a male subject distributed through time, these lyrics offer a vision of a male subject subsumed into his surroundings and a world in which natural forms are forged by masculine feeling. Like Courbet's medieval alter-ego whose authority is produced by shaping his immediate environment, Smith's lyrics present us with a narcissistic male subject distributed through his surroundings: a self that constitutes his own melancholic ecosystem.

Like many contemporary artists, Smith is interested in exploring the subjective content that arises through highly circumscribed artistic processes. Smith imposes a rigid logic upon his working method: all work derives from the contents of his photographic archive, which he continually studies and restudies. The memories invoked by this process suggest places that can in turn be photographed or evoked via

reconstruction. The composite interaction of documentary and fiction in his practice alludes to the complex layering of experiences that characterise subjectivity in general. The neutral taxonomy of the archive almost immediately falters in this experimental program, becoming a mere carapace for the organic and chaotic self-reflection that dominates Smith's practice. The composite nature of his methods can be detected in the variations of film stock and technique that occur across the body of work. These markers of difference become part of the formal language of the work, alluding to change and growth without surrendering a clear narrative of progressive technical mastery. Smith's process is a fundamentally anachronic one: a practice in which past and present are in a perpetual state of mutual eclipse. This layered exchange embodies the refractive logic that defines the project as a whole. Images and ideas pass through each other, setting off new paths of enquiry in an increasingly complex expressive scheme. The result is an impression of a masculine self incapable of settling on a single definitive representation.

Smith's inscribed photographs are embodiments of contingency. In them, the masculine subject, far from being a static and authoritative point of orientation for the artwork, becomes instead a sequence of shifting silhouettes, shadows, memories and scenes: a self assembled along horizontal lines rather than one that presumes an authentic and fixed singularity. For Smith, the familiarity of the photographic medium combines with its essential melancholy to provide a site where the refractive interplay of self, image, place and text can be observed and felt. What results is a portrait of a subject in process – a view through the artist's practice and life that remains as resolutely openended as the subject himself. And this is where the richness of Smith's work lies – in his capacity to allude to the depths of male subjectivity, without succumbing to the temptation to present this experience as something separate from the subjectivity of others.

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[i] For a discussion of this work in relation to notions of artistic labour see James Hall, *The World as Sculpture: The Changing Status of Sculpture from the Renaissance to the Present Day* (London: Pimlico, 2000), 176-82.

[ii] See Sigmund Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia* (London ; New York: Penguin Books, 2005).